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John L. Schmidt

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# **Raccoons AND THEIR CONTROL**

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE  
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
in cooperation with  
South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks



# RACCOONS AND THEIR CONTROL

By  
John L. Schmidt, Wildlife Specialist,  
Cooperative Extension Service  
South Dakota State University



Raccoons — a friend or foe?

To be sure, they occasionally cause economic loss to South Dakota landowners through depredation upon poultry houses and corn patches. Raccoons also have been found to be one of several controlling influences on South Dakota's pheasant population.

However raccoons have beneficial aspects, too, such as the value of their fur, the recreation they offer through hunting and trapping, and their habit of eating harmful insects and rodents.

This publication describes the raccoon, discusses methods of controlling their damage, — and offers a few recipes for the gourmet.

## DESCRIPTION

The name "raccoon" is derived from the Indian name "arakum." The scientific name is *Procyon lotor*. Perhaps the earliest reference in literature to the raccoon was made by Captain John Smith in 1612. He described the raccoon as a beast which resembles the badger but lives in trees as squirrels do. Actually it is not closely related to the squirrel or badger. Its nearest

familiar relatives are the ring-tailed cat of the Southwest U. S. and the panda "bear" of Asia.

The raccoon is a medium-sized, stocky mammal with his most noticeable feature being a black "mask" over the eyes. Body color varies from a grizzled brown and black on the back to a dull brown mixed with yellowish-gray underneath. The tail is marked with alternating rings of yellowish-gray and brownish-black, hence the name "ringtail" which, although incorrect, is sometimes used. Both sexes are similar in appearance. Pure white or albino individuals have been reported as well as black or melanistic raccoons and still others with a reddish coat.

Raccoons are about 26-36 inches long, including a tail of 8-12 inches, and weigh up to 25 pounds. Average weight is about 12 pounds. Generally, body weights are greatest in the fall and least at the end of winter. Very rarely a wild raccoon may weigh as much as 50 pounds.

Raccoons are capable of several sounds. Their most common sound is a chuckling noise. When an-





noyed they may snarl, hiss or growl. A mother uses a low grumbling purr to call her young. A young raccoon (when separated from its mother) gives a call similar to a tree frog's. In autumn, especially, raccoons may call to each other with a shrill, screech owl-like whistle.

### DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

The raccoon is found throughout South Dakota and the contiguous 48 states. The animal has not always enjoyed his current prosperity. Raccoons were forest dwellers of limited abundance when South Dakota was part of the Northwest Territory. The college coonskin coat craze of the 1920's soared pelt prices to \$14, while their numbers sagged to a new low. This decline became so alarming that in several states they were reared for restocking and artificial dens were constructed. Then in the 1940's their numbers seemed to explode throughout the Midwest, whether restocked or not. It would appear that the raccoon has adapted well to a more intensive type of agriculture.

### ECOLOGY

#### Food Habits

Food habits of the raccoon have been extensively studied in several parts of the country. Their choice of food is rather unlimited as they, like man, pigs and bears, are omnivorous (they can eat both plant and animal material) thus they are quite adaptable in their food habits. For example, if a drought were to eliminate some of their preferred animal food, such as crayfish or insects, they can easily substitute plant items, such as corn, in their diet. Their diet also varies with the season of the year. Wild berries, acorns and various insects are eaten when available. Furthermore their diet may also vary with the locality in which they are found because of differences in the availability of food. For example, raccoons found in the Black Hills eat different foods than those living in eastern South Dakota even at the same time of the year.

There are, however, certain general statements that may be made regarding food preferences of the raccoon. During the summer the bulk of their diet is comprised of crayfish, while corn, insects, snails, and fruits are also of importance. In the fall, corn becomes, by far, the most important element in their diet with crayfish and insects still being eaten. Small mammals, principally mice, become an important item of a raccoon's diet in winter although corn is still heavily utilized during early winter. In late spring a larger percentage of fish are taken, probably because of their availability in pools after spring floods. Rodents and corn are important staples in the diet in the spring, until insects and crayfish become numerous again.

Other elements occasionally eaten by raccoons in South Dakota but never constituting a large portion of their diet are: various seeds, grasses, acorns, worms,

birds, frogs, eggs, snakes, chickens, squirrels and rabbits. Recent studies by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks indicate that the raccoon is one of the animals that inhibits the pheasant population by eating their eggs. They are also known to be fond of liquor that is sweet and strong and to imbibe until they are intoxicated.

#### Reproduction and Mortality

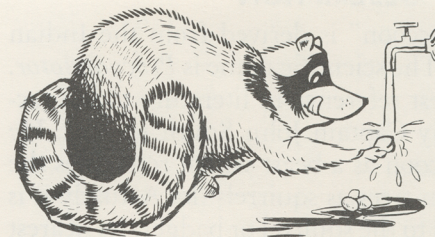
Most female raccoons breed at the age of one year. The young are normally born in April or May after a 63-day gestation period. The usual litter size is three or four but litters as small as one and as large as seven have been reported. The young weigh approximately 2½ ounces at birth. They are born blind, but are able to see when 18-20 days old. The young stay in the den for 8 to 10 weeks at which time they learn to eat solid foods and start foraging with their mother. By August they are normally weaned. Most of the young remain with the mother throughout the first winter, although some leave their mother during the fall.

Raccoons are known to have lived up to 12 years in the wild and to 15 years in captivity. However, only about 1 in 100 wild raccoons ever reaches 7 years of age. About 70% of most populations is comprised of individuals less than one year old.

Several natural mortality factors affect this species. Coyotes and bobcats prey upon the raccoon and great horned owls take some of the young. Ticks, fleas, lice, bot-fly larvae, round worm, flukes and tapeworm parasitize this species. Diseases affecting raccoons include infectious enteritis, rabies, tuberculosis, canine distemper, and a skin disease caused by a fungus. Probably the most obvious mortality factor is the automobile as may be evidenced by carcasses frequently seen along our highways.

#### Habits

It is mistakenly thought that a raccoon washes his



**Raccoons DON'T wash their food.**

food before eating it. Although a large portion of the diet, especially in the summer, is taken from lakes and streams where it appears to be "washed," no special effort is made to wash those food items which are not derived from the water. Some scientists believe that raccoons like to feel their food with their sensitive front feet and that wetting them makes them even more sensitive. Another misconception is that the raccoon has no salivary glands. This "old wives tale" was no doubt perpetuated by the belief





Raccoons usually live where a nearby water source is available. Crayfish make up the raccoon's major animal food.

that raccoons had to soften their food in the water before eating it.

Raccoons do not hibernate; however, during periods of snow and ice storms, they may den up either alone or in groups. This is not true hibernation as they maintain a near normal body temperature and are responsive to touch and other stimuli.

The raccoon is normally nocturnal and is rarely seen between dawn and dusk. The adults usually forage alone. The young however, travel with their mother. Their home range averages less than one square mile. They may have several dens within this range and may not use the same one continuously. Young raccoons have been known to disperse up to 165 miles from their birth place, however, a normal dispersal would be less than 30 miles.

Raccoons are generally found along rivers and streams and around lake borders with adjacent wooded areas. They usually make their home in hollow trees or logs, rocky exposures, burrows, old buildings, marsh vegetation, and woody thickets. Their ability to adapt to such a wide variety of habitats—especially deserted farm houses—may help explain their huge numbers in South Dakota.

Raccoons are excellent climbers and will usually ascend a tree at the first sign of danger. They are also excellent swimmers. On land they walk with a lumbering gait and can be outrun by man. They will fight if cornered, but they prefer to run or hide.

### **ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE**

Raccoons have both positive and negative values. In many parts of the country they are valued as game animals. The usual method of hunting is to turn hounds loose in known 'coon territory and wait for them to "tree" the game.

Raccoons consume large quantities of corn, especially sweet corn. When sweet corn and field corn are planted in the same field, raccoons will many times take only the sweet corn and leave the field corn untouched. They may also become a pest in the poultry house, especially during a drought when many of their natural food items are unavailable.

Many of their food items, particularly rodents and insects, are pests to man. Without the control afforded by this and many other predator species, populations of rodents and insects would undoubtedly increase.

Raccoons are often captured and treated as pets. They should be captured when 8 to 10 weeks of age to insure complete tameness. They are affectionate, intelligent and quite clever and mischievous. Some, however, have become antagonistic overnight. This change in behavior has often been associated with the breeding season. Like other pets they are subject to several diseases and should be given preventative immunization by a veterinarian.

The raccoon is also a valuable fur bearer. In recent years, pelts have sold for \$1.50 to \$4.00 depending upon the quality of the pelt and the current demand. The fur is used mainly for collars, muffs and trimmings. In the past 'coonskin coats, 'coontails and 'coonskin or Davey, Crockett caps have been quite popular and created by heavy demand for raccoon pelts. The fur is usually prime by December 1, although some females which have borne young do not become prime until later and occasionally one may not become prime at all.

In pioneer days, raccoon pelts were used for articles of clothing and for barter. Oil from their fat was used as a leather preservative, as well as to lubricate machinery. The baculum, a small bone in the penis, has been used as a ripping tool by tailors.



## RECIPES FOR RACCOON

The flesh of young raccoons is delicious when roasted and is considered a delicacy in some parts of the country. Raccoon meat is dark. The fat is strong in both flavor and odor, and most persons prefer to remove it before cooking. Raccoon is usually parboiled before roasting. Several of the more popular recipes are listed below.

### Roasted Raccoon

Leave a  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch layer of fat on the raccoon. Cover carcass with cloth dipped in fat. Place on a roasting rack in a shallow pan. Do not cover or add water. Bake at 275-300° F. 3 to 4 hours. Remove cloth the last  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour; baste several times with drippings and dust with flour after each basting for a crackly and crisp crust.

### Fricasseed Raccoon

|                                      |                               |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 raccoon cut into<br>serving pieces | $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon pepper |
| $\frac{1}{4}$ cup flour              | 3 tablespoons fat             |
| 1 teaspoon salt                      | 2 cups water                  |

Remove fat from lean meat. Combine flour, salt and pepper in a bag. Add meat and shake bag to coat. Fry in hot fat until brown. Add water, cover and simmer 2 hours or until tender.

### Stewed Raccoon

|                                 |                   |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 raccoon                       | flour             |
| 2 onions sliced                 | vinegar and water |
| $\frac{1}{2}$ cup celery sliced | salt and pepper   |
|                                 | cloves            |

Clean raccoon, cut into serving pieces. Soak overnight in a solution of equal parts water and vinegar with addition of a sliced onion and a little salt. Drain, wash and wipe. Parboil 20 minutes, drain and cover with fresh boiling water. Add one sliced onion,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of celery sliced, a few cloves, salt and pepper. Cook until tender, then thicken gravy with flour.

## CONTROL

Control is warranted in areas where raccoons have become so numerous that they are a pest. Hunting is probably the most enjoyable form of control, although other methods are most efficient. Trapping is the most satisfactory method of controlling raccoons.

### Trapping

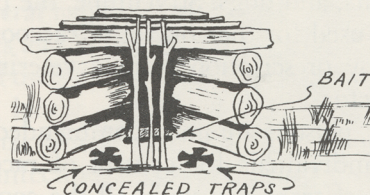
Raccoons are easy to trap. The No. 2 double coil-spring fox trap is best suited for this purpose. To remove the factory oil finish and to prevent rusting, the traps, trap wire, and other metal materials should be boiled in a solution of water and straining materials, such as, oak, maple or hemlock bark, walnut hulls, or logwood chips (obtainable at most drug stores). Hang the traps until dried (rubber gloves should be used to avoid contamination) and then dip each trap into a molten purified beeswax bath. Hang the trap again until the wax has dried. New, contaminated or extensively used traps should be treated this way.

Several kinds of "sets" are successfully used to catch raccoons. The "dirt-hole" set is one of the best. The trap is set about a half inch below the ground surface, 1-2 feet from the side of the trail. The trap pan should be covered first with a piece of tissue or canvas to prevent dirt from getting under it and locking it open, then it should be covered lightly with sifted

soil. A small hole—about 6 inches deep and 3 inches across—dug at a slant just behind the trap will attract raccoons to the set, particularly if a gland lure is applied in the dirt hole in the winter and early spring and a food lure during the rest of the year. Both lures are available from trapping equipment suppliers. Be sure the trap chain is securely fastened to a stake or a drag (small open end metal links are good for this purpose).

The "cubby" or "tunnel" set is especially useful in winter because it protects the traps, but it may be employed at any season. A triangular "house" with large sticks or small logs about 1 foot high and 2 feet deep is constructed then covered with boughs or sticks, and leaves. The trap should be hidden just inside the open end and the bait placed behind it. A cubby set may also be made with two open ends, with a trap in each end and bait in the middle. The use of a drag, instead of a stake, is desirable so the cubby set will not be destroyed by a trapped animal. A live trap or box trap is an almost identical substitute for a cubby trap set.

CUBBY SET



"Water" sets are popular in many places, particularly in marshy areas and along streams. The main advantage of a water set is that it is easy to place the trap without arousing the raccoon's suspicions. The trap is placed 2 or 3 inches beneath the surface, either in a riffle or similar shallow place, or 5 to 6 inches from shore, or at the entrance to a water cubby. Both the trap jaws and chain should be covered lightly with fine silt—do not use bait. A bright shiny object (such as a bright button or aluminum foil) attached to the pan of the trap will arouse a raccoon's curiosity causing him to investigate the shiny object on the trap pan. Such a lure can also be used on land sets near raccoon trails.

### Repellents

Ordinary fencing will not keep raccoons from gardens or poultry ranges. If the animals cannot go under it or through it, they will climb over. Raccoons, and most other small predators, may be repelled by adding a single electrified wire strand to a fence. The wire should be 8 inches from the fence and 8 inches above the ground.



Burrowing beneath a fence can be prevented by burying a 2-foot wire mesh 6 inches into the soil leaving 18 inches exposed.

As raccoons are nocturnal feeders, lights will sometimes deter them from damaging field crops. These can be incandescent bulbs, if electrical power is available, or kerosene lanterns or flares scattered throughout a field. Frequent moving of the lights will give better results, but the method is not always successful.

Oil of mustard is obnoxious to animals—people too. It is suggested for use on the ground or object being damaged by raccoons. Mix 1 ounce of oil of mustard and 1 ounce of household detergent with 1 gallon of water. Several spray applications at 3-day intervals may be necessary to stop persistent raids of raccoons. In sweet corn, avoid spraying directly on ears but treat ground and base of stalks in late evening.

#### Poisons

The use of poisons for raccoon control has many drawbacks. Many animals that are poisoned wander away and are not found; consequently, their pelt cannot be salvaged. Most poisons are not selective and are dangerous to other animals—valuable furbearers, domestic cats, and dogs. Strychnine, the poison most commonly used for the control of raccoons, is available only by prescription from a veterinarian or a medical doctor.

In short, poisons are not recommended for use by untrained individuals for control of raccoons. The skillful use of traps is usually all the control that is necessary to maintain an animal population at a level where it will not cause damage. If trapping and hunting pressure is not controlling raccoons at the desired

level, then poisons may be used, but **only by skilled personnel trained and experienced in the use of lethal agents.**

When poisons are placed in an area to control raccoons, certain safety precautions should be used. If the area is used by the public, it should be posted with signs. Residents of the area should be advised that poisons are being used so they can keep domestic stock and pets away. Signs, such as the one illustrated, should be read and obeyed as they are for your protection and safety.

Research is currently underway to develop a chemosterilant for raccoons. If successful, the chemical would not kill but prevent or reduce reproduction in the raccoon.

#### Sources of Supply

For Oil of Mustard, odor repellent for raccoons. (This list may be incomplete; any omission is unintentional). Catonex Cat Repellent, Hydroponic Chem. Co., Copley, Ohio, 44321.

Dog-Away, Whitmire Research Lab., 339 S. Vandeventer, St. Louis, Mo., 63110.

G & O Rabbit Repellent, Goulard & Olena, Inc., Skillman, N. J., 08558.

Magnus, Mabree & Reynard, 16 Debrosses St., New York, New York, 10013.

National Dog Wick, National Scent Co., 10660 Stanford Ave., Garden Grove, Ca., 92640.

Pulvex-Shun, Wm. Cooper & Nephews, 1909-25 Clifton Ave., Chicago, Ill., 60614.

**Traps:** For a complete list of suppliers of live traps and steel traps see your County Agricultural Extension Agent.

#### Trapping Furbearers Sources of Supplies

##### Live Traps

Allcock Mfg. Co., P.O. Box 551, Ossining, N. Y., 10562.

J. J. Dill Co., P.O. Box 788, Kalamazoo, Mich., 49005.

Hub States Chem. & Equip. Corp., 2002 N. Illinois, Indianapolis, Ind., 46202.

Johnson's, Waverly, Ky., 42462.

Mercury Chemical Co., 2443 N. Clybourn, Chicago, Ill., 60614.

National Live Trap Corp., P.O. Box 302, Tomahawk, Wis. 54487.

Greg Smith's Tomahawk Live Trap Co., P.O. Box 323, Tomahawk, Wis., 54487.

F. C. Taylor Fur Co., 227 E. Market, Louisville, Ky., 40202.

##### Steel Traps

Animal Trap Co. of America, Lititz, Pa., 17543.

O. L. Butcher's Trapping Supplies, Shushan, N. Y., 12873.

Montgomery-Ward, check local catalog sales office.

Northwest Trappers Supply, Owatonna, Minn., 55060.

Sears Roebuck, check local catalog sales office.

F. C. Taylor Fur Co., 227 E. Market, Louisville, Ky., 40202.

## DANGER—POISON!

### DOG OWNERS—TAKE NOTICE

Poisoned Baits in this Area!  
DO NOT TAMPER WITH THEM!



POISONED BAITS HAVE BEEN PLACED IN THIS AREA TO CONTROL ANIMAL DAMAGE TO LIVESTOCK, GAME ANIMALS, AND CROPS. YOU ARE WARNED TO STAY AWAY FROM BAITS, AND TO KEEP YOUR PETS AWAY. THESE BAITS ARE PROPERTY OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT AND COOPERATORS.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
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